

BHAVABHUTI
A BRIEF SKETCH OF LIFE & WORKS

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Professor S. Ramanathan who teaches Sanskrit at Acharya Pathashala in Bangalore was invited to speak on Bhavabhuti, the famous Sanskrit Poet & Dramatist. This was part of a series organised in 1983 at the Indian Institute of World Culture on Sanskrit Poets. Bhavabhuti's works are constantly read and discussed at various forums. This paper endeavours to give the necessary background information both on Bhavabhuti's life and works.

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BHAVABHUTI: A BRIEF OF SKETCH LIFE & WORKS

Professor C. RAMANATHAN

Bhavabhuti is one of the most illustrious poets of ancient India who, according to many critics, ranks next only to Kalidasa as a great dramatist. If Bhasa or Kalidasa lived in an age when, probably, literary activity was still in its initial stages with regard to classical Sanskrit literature, by the time Bhavabhuti appeared on the literary scene, literary traditions were laid on firm foundations. Sanskrit poetics or Alankarasastra based on Bharata's Natyasastra had been engaging the attention of many eminent writers and Dandin had contributed his famous work Kavyadarsa. Bana had become exceptionally popular and had won the proverbial appreciation BANOEESTAM JAGATSARVAM (All the world is left over by Bana meaning nothing is left out in Bana's descriptions) among his critics. Harsa's dramas had also attained, probably, enviable popularity on the stage besides getting the appreciation of critics as model works.

Bhavabhuti emerged at a time when critics were quite rigid in testing the worth of Kavya based on the rules of Sanskrit Dramaturgy. Bhavabhuti's impatience to accept the onslaughts of his contemporary critics is evident in the famous stanza of Malati-Madhava. He trod his own path of poetry which earned eminence among later writers. Though his statements about himself seem to be arrogant, as many think, he exhibits great self-confidence which is evident in his plays. He says in the prologue of Malati-Madhava that he is conversant in Vyakarana, Mimamsa and Nyaya besides knowing the Vedas, Sankhya and Yoga. He was a product obviously of great Indian culture of his day born as he was, in a highly teamed Brahmin family arid imbibing all the aspects of learning he could get during his era. At some stage he must have left his native place Padmapura for Ujjaini for higher studies and to seek his fortune. His mastery over Sanskrit was so high that the Gaudi style in which he wrote his plays has rare parallels in Sanskrit literature. A poet with a propensity for profundity, Bhavabhuti has seldom touched on lighter aspects of Kavya. It is therefore no surprise that he dispenses with the Vidusaka in all his plays, probably intentionally.

Interestingly, both the names of the poet given by the poet himself in the introductions have given rise to the conjecture that they are not original names of the poet. The reference to himself as SRIKANTHAPADALANCHANA (Having a name which signifies that goddess Saraswati dwells in his throat) is interpreted as 'adorned with rich learning' and BHAVABHU- TIRNAMA (called Bhavabhuti) is understood as a person having a name (or title?) BHAVABHUTI. In a manuscript of Malati-Madhava, there is a reference to the author as the disciple of Kumarila at the end of the III Act and as Umbekacarya, disciple of Kumarila at the end of the VI Act. Who is this Umbeka? Is it the original name of Bhavabhuti? Nothing can be acceptably stated as this is a solitary reference to Umbekacarya as the author and there are no other references to this name of Bhavabhuti.

Bhavabhuti, so far as the available works in his name are concerned, has written three dramas. But there are a few interesting stanzas compiled in the anthologies, ascribed to Bhavabhuti. Did he write any other work besides the three dramas? It is possible that those works are not extant.

Bhavabhuti seems to have lived in the earlier part of the 8th century A.D. Rajasekhara who lived about 900 A.D. calls himself the incarnation of Bhavabhuti. The famous historical work Rajatarangini states (IV — 144) that Bhavabhuti and Vakpatiraja were patronised by Yaso- varman of Kanauj. Vakpatiraja who wrote Bandavaho mentions Adyapi while making (even now) reference to Bhavabhuti. Vakpatiraja, scholars believe, must have written his work between 733 A.D. — 753 A.D., being a junior contemporary of Bhavabhuti.

Of the three plays written by Bhavabhuti Mahaviracaritam is said to be the first. This play is available in eleven northern manuscripts and seven southern manuscripts. One of the manuscripts includes the sentence, SARVATHA PRACALITAHPATHAH (a text used everywhere). But interestingly Viraraghava, the commentator on Mahaviracaritam, writes that the original book consisted only upto V Act, 46th Stanza and the remaining part, viz. the remaining part of the V Act, VI & VII Acts, were written by Subrahmanyakavi; but though the editors like Todarmall and others think that the original work had only five acts ending with the 46th Verse. Many scholars believe that the manuscript referred to earlier having all the seven acts must be the genuine work. Another manuscript of the same work got from Kashmir says that the remaining part, namely, the V — 46 onwards was completed by Vinayakabhata.

The poet has made some interesting changes in the Mahaviracaritam from the source Ramayana, with a view to heighten the character of some roles. Kaikeyi has no role to play as the villain and the villain behind sending Rama to the forest is Surpanakha who comes in the disguise of Manthara and hands over to Rama a letter intended to be Kaikeyi's. In fact, Rama is ready to go to the forest in order to save the munis. Strangely, he goes to the forest straight from Mithila and not from Ayodhya. The character of Valin in the play is refined and not arrogant as portrayed in the Ramayana.

Rama is the Mahavira and as a warrior he fights with Parasurama, Valin and Ravana. The play, the poet says, therefore is Virarasatradhana (has the chief sentiment as bravery) Generally scholars believe that this must have been the first book written by Bhavabhuti. The poet has included as many as about thirty characters out of whom only about five or six are female characters. The poet employs the high-flown language of Gaudi style and verses are written in a variety of metres.

More interesting is the play Malati-Madhava which has ten acts, a Prakarana, and a plot based probably on a folktale of Brhatkatha. It has a main plot and a subplot which are largely the imagination of the poet. Besides the love stories of Malati and Madhava, the main story, and the Makaranda and Madayantika, the sub story, there are some fascinating and sometimes horror generating events in the play that make it unique in Sanskrit drama. Also the descriptive parts — especially in the IX Act — abound in the description of mountains, rivers and other such natural scenes. The scenes of horror, where the human flesh is offered to appease the Pisacas in order to get boons from them or where a devotee of Camunda prepares for a human sacrifice hold the audience spell-bound. The contemporary spectators however, must have been acquainted with such practices. The introduction also of a Buddhist nun adds to the uniqueness of the play when such a character is prominently shown as involved in bringing innocent lovers together. Accidental happenings where victims of fatal onslaught are being saved — Malati is saved accidentally once by Madhava and by Saudamini another time — make the play more awe inspiring. The play, however, is too long with a plot too complex that one scholar writes, “ the incidents subsequent to the scene in the cemetery (V Act) look like clumsy appendages and not like parts of a whole”.¹⁰

Uttaramacaritam is Bhavabhuti's masterpiece which is an excellent work, reknowned for poetic beauty and masterly presentation of Karuna rasa, the sentiment of pathos. Though the Ramayana versions are found in many Puranas and Buddhist and Jaina works, besides the Ramayana of Valmiki it is difficult to assert the exact source of the play. Much of the story seems to be the imagination of the poet who is eager to bring Karuna rasa very effectively. Characters such as Atreyi, Tamasa and Vasanti are quite new. Some incidents such as the war between Rama's army and Lava and Kusa or the performance of Asvamedhayaga after the

reunion with Sita are all from sources other than Valmiki Ramayana.

Bhavabhuti seems to have written this play mainly to depict Karunarasa. He introduces, in the beginning of the play itself the scene where Rama, Sita and Lakshmana watch the pictures of the Rama story with mixed feelings ; but the tragic parts of them portend, as it were, the gruesome time Rama has to face later. The pregnant Sita is tired and sleeps on the arm of Rama. The news that Durmukha gives to Rama sends him into a state of shock. Rama, aware of his duties to his men, remains like a rock when he sends Sita to the forest on the pretext of fulfilling her desire. Rama could not escape the suffering of separation from, his wife, as he held other things inconsequential before the duty of a King¹¹. But the suffering is so acute that after banishment of Sita the whole world looks void. His agony was quite intense but he would suffer it with determination¹². He would feel that his heart would break into pieces. His ruthless heart in banishing Sita and his tender heart when he weeps like a child, a portraiture seldom seen in Sanskrit drama, is beautifully depicted by Bhavabhuti. The poet's conception of Karuna rasa against the background of Rama's and other's lamentations points — so does the poet — to a new concept that all the rasas are products of Karuna rasa, the basic principle of human feeling¹⁸. Such an exposition of karunarasa has few parallels in any literature.

Bhavabhuti is a poet of profundity and lighter aspects of literature such as humour do not fascinate him. There is a conspicuous absence of Vidusaka in all the three plays. His conception of love and marriage are noteworthy. His language seems to fit into the language of the times. He employs only one Prakrit, viz. Sauraseni in all the plays and nowhere do we find a Prakrit stanza. Some places where Bhavabhuti repeats the stanzas appear to suggest that he must have kept the stanzas ready with him and used them wherever necessary¹⁴. Bhavabhuti's terse Gaudi style also points at his desire to exhibit richness of language than that of thoughts. His own statements such as Praudhatva, Udarata, (maturity and richness) and Vasyavak (speech under control) substantiate this view. His descriptions are sometimes too long and the characters too are at times lifeless. Bhavabhuti's pride in claiming this mastery in language and reproaching his critics have earned him not too good an appreciation among the modern critics.

Bhavabhuti chose his own way of poetry. He did not care, in all likelihood, to seek the patronage of any king and to eulogise him, nor did he meekly seek the appreciation of critics. But his works are invaluable contributions to Sanskrit drama. Suffice it to conclude with what Govardhanacarya wrote on him, "The Goddess of Learning shines like the mountain itself in contact with Bhavabhuti. Otherwise does the rock shed tears in his poetic pictures of pathos?"

REFERENCES

1. *Malatimadhavam — I Act-6*
2. *Kavayah kalidasadyah bhavabhutirmahakavih*
Kalidasa and others are poets but Bhavabhuti is a 'great' poet
3. *Yam brahmanamiyam devi vag vasyevanuvartate,*
He, a Brahmin, whom this Goddess of speech obeys as if under control,
(b) Vasyavacah Kaver Vakyam
(The poet's speech is under his control).

4. *Padawkyapramanajnah*

A commentator, Viraraghava, interprets pada as grammar, Vakya as Nyaya and Pramana as Mimamsa

5. *Bhattasrikanihapadalanchano bhavabhutir nama jatukarni putrah*

Bhavabhuti by name, adorned by the name Bhattasrikantha, son of Jatukarni

6. *Bhavad Bhagavato Bhutir ity Anuvartha Ityahuh*

Having an appropriate name, 'One who got rich learning from Lord Siva '

7. *Sarngadharapaddhati*8. *Rajatarangini—IV-144*9. *Gaudavaho, 799*10. *R.G. Bhandarkar (quoted by C.K. Venkataramaiah)*11. *Uttararamacaritam. 1-12*12. *Ibid. III—1*13. *Ibid III —47*14. *Ibid VI—12. Malatimadhavam, I — 24*

Note that the same Verse is repeated.